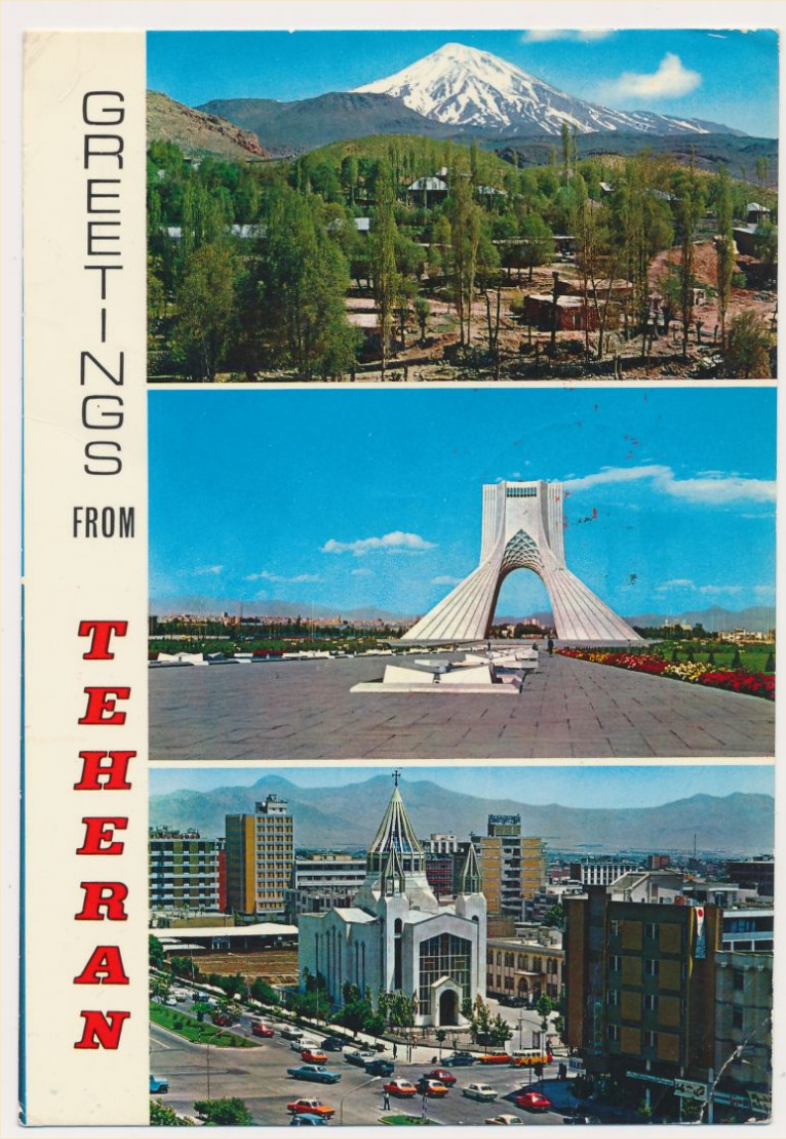


A WEEKEND IN IRAN

DURING WAR. STORIES AND HISTORIES FROM TEHRAN

1 – Touchdown Tehran.
Smug cats of muddy tails, Maria & Passports, beating the Exchange.

2 – A Drive Worth a Thousand Words.
Motorway-picnics, tea prophecies, and the war.

3 – Capital of Lions and the Sun.
The urban milieu, Western trickle, L.A and Paris.

3 – A Lady (Tehran) Doesn't Tell.
Riddled taxi, traditions and a sound.

4 – "Jeitinho" in the Iranian Underworld.
Brazil, bending laws, witt, and eloquence.

5 – Concrete Jungle where Dreams are made of?
Parties, nude, modelling and supercars.

6 – Alarmist or Alarmed?
The day of the explosions.

7 – Tehran, a Haunted House.
A lavish taste, lost with time.

8 – Tooth for a Tooth.
Sour delights, rubies and gold.

9 – Must be Tall, to be Global !
Swiss Tower, shattered glasses and the vulgar thumbs-up.

ON THE 15TH OF MAY 2024, ONE OF THE LARGEST MISSILE AND DRONE ATTACKS EVER RECORDED WERE CONDUCTED BY IRAN; THE FIRST EXTERNAL BOMBARDMENT OF ISRAEL SINCE SADDAM HUSSEIN'S SCUD MISSILES IN 1991.

IT WAS AN OFFICIAL PROCLAMATION OF WARFARE BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS.

I have written Chapter 1 (*Touchdown Tehran*), and Chapter 2 (*Drive Worth a Thousand Words* + *Capital of Lions and the Sun*) as introductory, historical and contextual chapters to my narrative. More personalised experiences begin in Chapter 3 (*A Lady Doesn't Tell*).

Istanbul's Grand Airport. 12th of April, 2024. Flight to Tehran.

The clock strikes midnight, as we wait, so patiently, for a call. Eventually we are notified of a three-hour delay.

Flight Information-Display tells us the flight has been re-scheduled to the dusk of dawn, 4:45am. This decision seems oddly specific, quite tactical in our eyes. Albeit unspoken, there's a unanimous feeling that the airline opted not to fly above Iran during nightfall. Leaving from Istanbul at this hour means flying over Iranian territory only when the sun is out. Call it paranoia if you wish.

Some of us are wired to the news. The BBC has just released a statement; "Joe Biden expects Iran to attack Israel SOONER than LATER". The Financial Times front page says: "Iran signals a calibrated retaliation to Israeli strike". I opt for the opinion article instead, to the tunes of: "The Middle East is on the PRECIPICE of war". Clearly a period of low ebb for Anglo-Iranian affairs.

As I board the plane, scarce to its maximum capacity, I wish to fall asleep and only wake up on the ground… but matinal sunrays disturb my rests. Adjusting for eyesight I'm faced with the snow-capped mountains of the Turkish Anatolian range, Lake Van beneath me. Primrose-covered banks and pine-clad hillsides are carved from a rock-face plateau, shaped by deep gullies and ravines. It could've been Scotland, or Norway, even the Swiss Alps to any (more creative) foreign eye.

The closer we get to Iran, however, the more dreary, treeless, and featureless the steppe becomes. Vast spaces of nothingness but plain horizons; a backdrop of barren drought. Having read the dreamy impressions of Persia from the imaginings of Goethe's *Ost-Westlicher Divan* or Victor Hugo's *Orientales*, this new landscape presents itself… underwhelming at best.

1 – Touchdown Tehran

The plane begins its descent to the sound of groans of discontent. The passenger to my left mumbles "terrible depressurization", as she swallows a mint to equalize the air in her ears. I'm not quite sure if this glumness is strictly because of the airplanes' cruising altitudes, or nerviness to be arriving in Tehran. Looking out the window, the city appears odd; I see low slopes of silt and clay sediment, what seems an area of poor, natural drainage. But, as the plane turns its wings, we're finally confronted by the beautiful and greenish Alburz mountains, *Caspian Sea* beyond naked sight. "Tehran basks in the sun like a smug cat whose muddy tail extends to the edge of a salty desert (…) above it is a lyrical skyline of wind chimneys, blowing atop a lifeless terrain", I accompany the texts from Sackville-West's novel, *A Passenger in Tehran.*

Once landed, the jetty is attached and plane ready to disembark. Women begin hovering their heads with *hijabs*, some use veils, others' scarves and shawls. A rare lady satisfies the law with a manteaux-tunic around her neck. I adore the fashion sense - not a single grey garment in sight. Every hijab shows a colour and a style. Not everyone agrees, but everyone respects. "It's *Pious fashion*", the lady seated next gossips to my ear, grinning from side to side. I am quick to realise that the ethnographic vignettes of women's outfits **clearly counter** the presumptions we make; That modest dressing cannot be fashionable, that fashion cannot be faithful. As Avicenna puts it, "sensible (…) and intelligible beauty".

Up next, the passport control is rough. We are lone foreigners in a relatively large airport yet are ordered to line up in a single file, to a single gate indicating "Tourists". Imagine a group of 34 Portuguese people, whose ladies almost all have "Maria" in their names. For the Iranian border-control, this is confusing and slow. My name is Nuno, the only Nuno in this expedition, so it does not trouble the lady attending me. She never makes eye contact and I respond by not looking back, wondering how she matched my face to the passport photo.

On the arrivals floor, waiting for luggage, I decide to swoop into the "Currency Exchange" till knowing cash runs imperial over credit cards. Aware the official rate to be around 50,000 rials for a euro, I'm surprised when the teller

says he can trade my euros for… 500,000 rials (each) instead? What? I'd be making 10 euros on every euro traded, it seemed too nonsensical. As it turns out, my initial "awareness" was misguided.

The official currency is indeed the rial, but locals use the "toman" instead, which conveniently removes a zero from the rial value… blame inflation and debauched Economics for that. "Exchange in the streets!", the man advises me. "The CBI rate is no good here (…), and the internet is not your friend either", he ends with a knowing smile. I'm confused but follow orders, later exchanging a euro for 70,000 TOMANS, or 700,000 rials instead. Puzzling but worthwhile at the end. You are probably as confused now, as I was then.

2 – Context and History:

"A Drive worth a thousand words"

As the bus drives us northbound, 10:30 am, I notice a commonality that brings back memories from *Amman*, in Jordan. For every shade of Sycamore, Pine, or Cypress tree near the motorway verges are people lounging with picnic sets. Tea-making paraphernalia and shisha pipes are brought out of family vans, and everyone seems amused. Especially during Sizdah-bedar, the final day of the ongoing Nowruz festivities. Apparently, families leave their homes to banish the "jinx" of the thirteenth day, which is **today**.

The morning sun pours down and promises a fantastic day ahead. There exists a certain resistance from the regime to engineer reverse-laws on picnics but… "Persians are always ready (…) It's so hard to get angry at public picnics without looking ridiculous!", I am told.

This drive to the hotel represents many "firsts" for us all. Quite emotional to be here, tense but exhilarated to be fulfilling a life-long dream of visiting *Persia*. On the rare occasion, I spot dilapidated tanks used as decoratives for gated communities, people armed at certain checkpoints, military watchtowers, **this is the truth**. But, in the levity of it all, a large mausoleum takes my breath away: Four imposing minarets and a large golden dome, raised on a drum, shimmering miragelike to the horizon as any holy shrine should. The entrance has tall *iwan* portals of tiled facades. Between us and the sanctuary are walls with barbed wires, single-story sheds of light-brown brick and metal sheeting, selling kebabs and disseminating tapes of *Khomeini's* speeches. Here is where THE **Ruhollah Khomeini** rests, founder of the Iranian Islamic Republic, at the "Paradise of Zahra" complex (Beheshzahra).

"That's where the 12th Imam lays too!", I hear say sarcastically.

"He returned in 1979!" – the year of the Islamic revolution – "(…) But, as always, the innocent loses and the greedy win", the guide ends his rant, marred with ironies. For context, Shia Muslims believe that Mahdi, the 12th Imam and successor of Prophet Muhammad who mystically disappeared in a cave near *Samarra*, Iraq, over a millennia ago, would one day return on "Judgement Day" to re-order a "perfect society". Some associate this day to when the Iranian monarchy - considered an "illegitimate authority" - was "finally" overthrown by the theocratic Islamists.

This whole "paradise complex", we are told, gives the impression that Khomeini wanted to connect his relic to older religious leaders; claim immortality for his messages. You see portraits of himself intravenously spread across town, wearing his traditional clerical garb. "You can't throw a stone without hitting one" went on a joke. "And if you do, get yourself arrested!".

"People mistake him for a religious Imam, but his powers lay in the profane of politics instead", the conversation follows. It took a while to realise this at first, but we picked signs as we went:

Take, for example, the curious case of Iranian **tea-etiquette**. Most are unaware it carries a religious – but also political – superstition to its name.

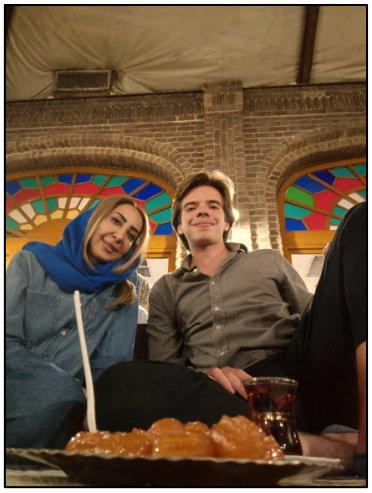
For starters, no one **stirs** sugar into tea here, perish that thought! Not even a spoon is given to attempt such sacrilege in Iran. Instead, you **dip** the *ghand* sugar cube in the tea and then put it in your mouth, letting it dissolve with every sip taken. Why this polis?

Legend rests the *Shah* once allowed foreign merchants to initiate a concession over sugar cubes in Iran, causing prices to rise and local "Bazaari-men" to protest. The revolt eventually reached the opposing *Mullahs* at the mosque who issued a *fatwa* declaring sugar to be haram, or unclean, as to deter the "foreigners" from the markets. The call was successful, and Iranians promptly obeyed. There was just one issue there… inconvenience. Let's be honest, sugar as haram is inconvenient for everyone. Soon after merchants left, the Iranian royal court ordered **another** Mullah to give a "rebuttal" fatwa saying it was OK to consume sugar, ONLY if dipped in tea first. Afterall, the Iranian tea is "pure", so dipping means you have purified it in the process. This custom still prevails!

Most are unaware why… it started over business feuds and politics.

2.1 "TEA-AHOLICS"

Keeping this conspiracy at bay, we arrive to the hotel as the clerk pours me tea. The process to make this beverage is a complete alchemy here; and this isn't an overstatement I make.



We drink the tea from an *estekan* glass adorned in *niloofar* "blue lotus" motifs. "Can you spot the tone of mahogany?", he questions me. "Like your wine, colour matters (…) it should be lightly translucent, yet mahogany". The tea is poured from a narrow, gold-rimmed pot, curved in the middle "like a slim-waisted lady", the servant playfully personifies. Too short a steaming process won't bring out enough theine from the black tea, but too long a process will bitter it out with tannin. He then hands me a small saucer with two sugar cubes, one crystalised in rosewater and another tainted in orangey-infused saffron.

The man tells me he's even into "tasseomancy"; which is a form of divination, fortune-telling based on the patterns of tea leaves (!). I'm embarrassed to tell him this; but for someone like myself, whose palate has been corroded by all those university years, I'm easily humbled by his ceremonies. Everything is **literally** done to a "T" here.

The image I attach is from another experience we had, drinking tea, accompanied by dry dates and currants whilst dining out in the city.

2.2 "THE CAPITAL LAND OF LIONS AND THE SUN"

To end this introductory chapter before, moving to my practical experiences on the ground, allow me to briefly write about the city's peculiar urban "milieu". We turn back the pages of time not to bore you, rather to contextualise.

In the span of forty years, during the twentieth century, Tehran's population grew nine-fold, and landmass twelve. Imagine the litany of urban problems this brings, possibly never to be resolved. I experienced first-hand that vehicles in circulation far exceed the capacity of street systems (it is an actual fender-bender craze to drive here), and that smog seems endemic to the place… a result of extreme geographical engineering that has caused a dome of hot air, trapping pollution.

I'd also like to catalogue Tehran an "organic" city; like a hotchpotch of concrete buildings shaped freely and randomly on the needs and wills of society over time. It is beautiful to see. There exists a harmony between what the city is, and what it has been required to become.

Compared to other places I travelled within the Eurasian Steppe, such as the Soviet-touched capital of *Tashkent*, Uzbekistan, there exists a much denser urban fabric here of irregular spatial structures and less linearity, despite a uniquely well-respected civil order, I must say. My guide calls it "Bazaar-logic".

Tehran is also **not** an "interesting" city. Not when compared to older, regional metropolises like Istanbul, Cairo, Baghdad, or Damascus. Neither is it historically relevant to the likes of Isfahan, Persepolis, or Shiraz. Sorry to tell. I don't wish to discredit the complexities of it today, but recall that, during the eighteenth century, this place had just under fifteen thousand people - contrasted to the twelve million currently living.

But to label Tehran a city of "lofted minarets" and "mud-brick homes" with piercing calls to prayers, bearded clerics, and women veiled from head-to-toe, is to label Tehran completely wrong. **Do not be deceived**.

The difference between north and south Tehran, for example, is screamy. Driving past the northern quarters, of greater moderate climates near the mountains, I spot fifty million $ apartments equipped with private helipads and built on marble stones. You see gridlocked Tehranis (and us) idled in the daily travails of Iranian traffic, while a helicopter flits back-and-forth overhead.

These neighbourhoods were designed by French architects, so noticeable by their wide symmetric streets and cul-de-sac alleyways. "Urbaneers" arrived here to envision a new "decentred-LA" suburban city, and to challenge Beirut as the new "Paris of the Middle East". It is, essentially, a cut-off from the "chaotic, noisy, confused and backwards", "Third-World Tehran"; as they would call it. And it trickles down socially too: The men rocking a clean-shave with slick-back hair, tight jeans and western-logo clothes. Women wearing colourful scarves, pulled-back to reveal as much of their blonde and red-dyed hair, sporting all sorts of shiny amulets, rings, and necklaces. Not to mention the clear exposure to western beauty standards, cosmetic surgeries as TV personalities or Hollywood actresses. Here, I met the Iranian maximalist culture **all-round**. That austere image we get passed on, of a population embodied in scruffiness and unsophisticated piety towards Islamic militancy, does not apply.

It would be incorrect to assume that I'll keep bashing on the inequalities and imperfections of Tehran. The next chapter is where my travel chronicles well and truly begin :)

3 – A LADY (TEHRAN) DOESN'T TELL

I must tell you something this capital has, that no other ever will: A particular "sound". Allow me more text to explain.

Reading Laudan Nooshin's chronicles helps best-describe this.

"Ten minutes into Tehran, I have my first encounter listening to Hafez (Persian poet). I bring it upon myself to ask the taxi driver about poetry. It's all the encouragement he needs. He whips out his copy of Divan of Hafez from the glove compartment, balances the open book on the steering wheel and starts reciting sonorously fourteenth-century poetry (...) as we barrel down (...) at 90km an hour, to the rush-hour crush of Tehran. (...) At the end of the journey, he inscribes his book and gives it to me, as a "yadgar" to remember him by. Poetry and generosity follow me through the rest of the trip."

Had we stayed the full thirteen days in Iran, we would have witnessed the most beautiful public ceremonies of this said "sound", experiences such as Laudan's in the taxicab. Listening to clandestine poetry readings, night-time, underneath the *Khaju Bridge* in Isfahan. What could have been!

This might sound cliché to the reader, but Iran is THE country where poetry reigns, even hiddenly. Not so much Tehran, more so cities like Shiraz. Turn on the radio to the tunes of poetic recitations, walk down the street to hear someone, somewhere, reciting *Hafez* or *Mowlana.* And if you don't, just step into any – (and I mean it) - traditional coffee-place to hear dramatic *Naqqāli* storytellers, itinerant *Darwish* mendicants, or a *Morshed* chanting the book of *Shahnameh*. Oh, the Shahnameh is something special; a true national epic, emulator of "Persianization" to its core, and written by a national hero - *Ferdusi.*

I hear that poetic language remains the purest form of manifestation here, which leaves me content. Poetry in Iran is self-reflective, ambulatory, multiple and so fragile to the public domain. More importantly, it preserves the name "IRAN" that I've learnt to know and love – a name meaning "land of the Aryans," or Azadi, "land of the free".

On our first day going out for lunch, we were dropped by our bus at what seemed a large roundabout of parked traffic. Indeed, it was the busy *Tajrish* Square. The streets were six-laned, but cars and trucks crammed themselves seven or eight abreast. Ahead of us, roads were simply not wide-enough to continue commuting by bus. Most of our group found smaller vans willing to take them to the designated restaurant situated in the bend of a beautiful, bucolic, river-streamed neighbourhood called *Darband.* But those who remained unseated, like myself, decided to grab a taxicab and go "the true Tehrani way" instead.

Little did I know what was coming my way…

It was one hell of a drive. Some manoeuvres I'd never experienced before. Not even whilst drifting 100km/h off the suburbs of San Francisco, California. One hand on the steering wheel, another on a sachet of watermelon seeds, eating them at an incredible rate of one seed per five seconds (or so it seemed), spitting out the window any unwanted remains. When the slightest traffic-jam instilled, the driver chronically left the car (door's open) to socialise with others, only to return twenty seconds later as traffic resumed. Once he even came back with a sandwich at hand!

Take this similar experience I found, written in Rick Steve's chronicles:

"Once, while stuck in Tehrani traffic, a man in the car besides us asks my driver to roll down his window. (...) He passes over a bouquet of flowers (...) and says, "Give (it) to the foreigner and apologise for the traffic"".

My taxi-drivers' car was a domestic-brand *Khodro*, battered inside and out. The amounts of accidents this man must've faced… Not just himself, it seemed everyone around us as well. That smell of pleather and burnt clutch, oh, those clutch discs and pressure plates must've been completely slipped! When asked how often he changed them, the man replied: "At least once every couple month's" … Just to give you an idea. Picture him, parched-tanned by the sun, with an oily, slicked-back hair, leather jacket and two chains hanging from his neck. Completely unfazed, sunglasses-on as he rips through the absolute hellhole that is traffic in Tehran.

Cramming our way ahead, to my side, a woman fixes her makeup in the rear-view mirror, completely oblivious to a green light. Drivers contour her car in a craze of honking, as she, very casually, puts her lipstick-set away. "*Yabo*!" I hear someone say. The Iranians in my car chuckle: "Your father's a donkey".

4. "*JEITINHO*" IN THE IRANIAN UNDERWORLD

Driving here is, interestingly enough, a form of secretive rebellion against the prying eyes of authorities. A rare opportunity to publicly flirt, always covertly, over each other's cars. Iranians come up with the cleverest, yet also most **recalcitrant** ways to joyride at their own speeds, play their own music's out loud, and even exchange phone numbers in the streets – all of which are strictly (publicly) forbidden in Iran. They remind me of Brazilians at times, finding the most creative ways to solve problems – or in this case, bend the law.

The rules here are **simple**: Forms of public affection can be contestable and sanctionable in the spheres of streets, markets, churches, and parks. What about inside the cars? Cheeky.

While riding the taxi, I witnessed something that initially didn't spark my attention. A group of boys, driving a worn-out *Peugeot*, stop next to another car being driven by a girl of similar age. She is not too shy to expose as much of her hair as legally allowed. A rushed conversation ensues, alas mission unsuccessful for the boys - no phone number is exchanged. The girl drives off in search for someone wittier, quicker, more eloquent instead. It's **speed dating**, Tehran-style.

The game is so fast paced, success is dependent on how well you **immediately** present yourself. Johannes Lenhard wrote a chronicle about another speed date he witnessed; this one more elaborate and delayed:

"Catch it and talk to me! (A boy) yells from his car while desperately trying to hit the right spot with the mobile phone (...) (which) lands on the lap of the girl in the neighbouring car, (as she) starts to accelerate. More

nervous now, the boy fiddles around with his OTHER mobile phone, pauses briefly (too nervous to keep driving), and finally dials. The girl's car is almost out of sight, but the excitement in the boys' eyes glows when (she) picks up."

Stories like these are endless. I adapt a Brazilian slang that brilliantly evokes this spirit; An Iranian form of "*Jeitinho*". Search it up.

4.1 – Addressing the (unfortunate) elephant in the room

Allow me to quickly describe, through own experiences, the situation women are exposed to in Iran. I understand the topics' sensitivity to those who have never been, neither want to be in this country **precisely** because of this. Legally speaking, women are limited off dancing publicly, singing, wearing short sleeves, holding hands, … even riding bicycles. Many times, while passing by live music, my guide would playfully bump my shoulder and say, "dance for us, Nuno!".

It is one of those rare situations in history where grandmothers had more civil rights than their grandnieces. Once even, as I calmly strolled the promenade of Lake *Chitgar* on a sunny Saturday afternoon, ice-cream on hand, I saw a girl my age be flagrantly stopped by 10 policemen and put inside a black-tinted van, because her veil wasn't fully covering. She was resistibly driven off to commission jail, her friends told me later. "She will probably be freed", one of the girls said, but only after a fine and reprimand from authorities. A case of "upholding virtue to combat the vice" according to these men from the "Gasht-e Ershad" gendarmerie.

During our stay in Tehran, all dinners were guaranteed to have live music, many times to the deprivation of the more extroverted ladies in my group; whose urge was to jump right off their seatings and dance with the "handsome" servicemen at our tables. On a particular teahouse we visited for dinner – a beautiful cottage-like space made of brick structures, decorated with traditional fireirons, coal-fired samovars, and Bakhtiari kelims – I saw women very elegantly

move their wrists in the air, nodding with subtility to the rhythms of songs being played. I was told some girls even learn *sign*-language as an excuse to dance publicly and sly away from "morality police" (yes, this is a thing). This way, if caught, they can claim their actions were "translation efforts" for the deaf. It is the *Jeitinho* I mentioned earlier, a form of living with wit. A unique sycophancy, and artifice, to embrace the law. There is no other way to put it.

However, I must be completely honest with the reader. To leave the message as is, would be to unfairly characterize my experience observing women's realities on the ground.

Because, at the same time these leaders try to domesticate their female counterparts and deprive them from certain public liberties, they are also mobilizing them greatly for labour participation. At the same time there exists a bias in Iran to favour an education and workforce based on *sonatha-ye qalat*, "erroneous traditions", this practice is itself incompatible with the Islamic rhetoric of "an environment (that) should not claim even one illiterate person", for example. My tour guide, she was one of the kindest, happiest, and most affectionate people I met. The director of our expedition was a wonderful, hard-working woman as well. When going out to eat, most tables were split evenly by sexes, some exclusively with girl-friends going out on amicable dates. The same is seen with staff at different establishments, and drivers across the city. "I wish I could show you how crazy Persian weddings are, or our indoor parties.", my guide confesses. "Everything is free-will within private walls" she humorously winks. Iranian women have taken the gauntlet to, using the government's own theocratic rhetoric and logics, implement their equality under the laws of Islam. You clearly notice this progressive stance; it's generally accepted by the population. Not to overlook the more secular period, lived by older generations, during monarchical rule. The point is, the "genie" is out the bottle, and it will likely not be forced back in.

5 – (PERSIAN) CONCRETE JUNGLE WHERE DREAMS ARE MADE OF?

A friend I made while walking around a shopping centre, talks me through a curious experience that might help you, the reader, understand the informal dynamics of the Iranian youth: The **private party** scenes.

He tells me of a basement social he'll be frequenting tonight and asks if I'd like to join. "Tell me more bro". Alright, "you will be greeted by two kind girls at the entrance, wearing high-heels and practically undressed", "obviously unveiled" he adds. "They will lead you upstairs to rooms with quantities of alcohol dwarfing those found in the best underground parties in London! You will try our Aragh (Sagi)". "What is that?". "Best moonshine. It is anise flavour, they distil it with raisin grapes." - most probably homemade or smuggled, I figured.

"The music bangs electro, "*Bergheim* style", "The girls grinding like Miley" … whatever this means. To his credit, he had lived abroad in New York and London to know. When asked "why?" he'd returned to Tehran, the answer was simple: "It's the new Iranian wave, brother, perfect for entrepreneurs".

"Anyway, here is the address brother", as a proxy is installed on my phone to access the blocked website. "My friend Reza can pick you up tonight, he just bought a new car"; - the picture of the car is shown on the I-Phone's lock screen. It's a sports car, customized with alloyed wheels, stereo subwoofers, and flashing aqua-blue lights around the dashboard. "The other night a girl offered him a million tomans to make love in this car", he jokingly claims. I see his friend, Reza, blushing from his chair. For obvious reasons, I had to decline the invite. If I were to join, that would be at my own discretion, whenever I travel back by myself.

…

"Also, can we take some pictures of you?" his partner asks.

Now, THAT caught me by surprise. It just confirmed my thesis that Persians are the most inscrutable people I've ever met, in the greatest sense of the word. Apparently, the couple owned a retail, fashion, and modelling - "photomontage"- company, with a combined one-hundred thousand followers on social media. During times of limited tourism, a foreigner like myself, in Tehran, was certainly a good catch. It`s "*Ghabel nadare*" she says, "you don't need to pay".

As a non-model, I proudly agree to the photoshoot, despite being clearly outside my comfort zone. While we plan some poses, I am served a *doudpati* "milk tea" with biscuits on the side. The conversations we have are interesting and modern: Talks about rock-bands in basements, coffee-shop romanticisms, weekend skiing, pool parties, so much "improper language" I would have not expected travelling here.

After "breaking the ice", three ladies accompany me around the shopping mall, orienting my poses and holding an external flash with reflectors, as a small crowd gathers around in oddity. Probably thinking I'm someone I'm not. But it was fun, and everyone shared a smile.

6 –GREATEST ATTRACTION, PEOPLE

Backtracking to the taxi-trip mentioned earlier, as we headed for lunch. One detail that deserves mentioning was the incredible hospitality for service, in general. Every table we sat to eat, waiters prepared and presented us with Portuguese and Iranian flags, side-by-side, as an appreciation token to our arrival. Always looking over our tables, ensuring everyone had their drinks filled, plates served, an imprimatur of smiles on all our faces. "Where is the toilet, sir?", "Follow me, come this way". No pointing where to go, a zero-dismissive attitude. They were excited to have us there with a true happiness to serve. Not to mention the huge portions brought to the table, varied as well. One would boorishly expect kebabs day and night, not the case. The saffron rice, sweet raw onions, blends of spices and sauces, fresh salading accompanied by the juiciest *Kabob Koobideh*, or the "white fish" fillet caught fresh from the Caspian Sea, turned our expectations to the highest standards when it needn't be this way. The restaurants simply kept "upping" their game.

On the note of hospitality, I formed a peculiar relationship with one of the clerks at the hotel we stayed, *Espinas International*. In the span of a single minute of conversation, he went from mentioning Portugal's most iconoclastic ambassador, Cristiano Ronaldo, to me getting on a phone with the Director of the Espinas Hotel chain, who happened to be Portuguese. "It's a pleasure having you here in Tehran!", I hear on the phone. "Thank you for having me!", I reply. The conversation is cordial but discrete, until he says "Get some rest, you must be exhausted (21:45pm). But I would love if you could come down to the lobby around 1:30am, so we can take a photo together and put it in our wall.". Yes, next to the likes of Tayyip Erdoğan, Ilham Aliyev, even Ronaldo when he visited Tehran earlier this year. It felt like a simulation, "surely a mistake to my character" I thought as the clerk looked at me with excitement. Maybe those modelling photos had already taken effect. Truth is, it happened; I did correspond to the photographic session that evening. If my photo was truly ever hung in the hotels' walls, I didn't stay long enough to see. But I would like to believe so. Whoever visits next time, please let me know!

It is important to note that, during this interaction, one of the largest missile and drone attacks ever recorded had <u>just</u> been conducted by Iran; the first external bombardment of Israel since Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles in 1991. It was an official proclamation of warfare between the two nations. Earlier this evening, I had been in direct contact with the Portuguese Ambassador to Iran, who called checking for my safety. We did not realise it yet, but our visit was being broadcasted on NATIONAL TELEVISION back home!

As was customary already, every evening I'd have to explain my situation to family members who feared the worst, sharing the most "terrible" news of "indiscriminate" warfare happening exactly where I lay. Particularly articles from CNN and Al Jazeera - I must single them out - to the point where my parents feared I may not even return if I stayed **any** longer. In a country of 90 million peoples, about the size of Spain, France and Germany combined. "The drama", I realised. Some members of our group interpreted this as a classic "Alarmist" case, while others had already become seriously "Alarmed". At the time, these concerns were being juxtaposed by our most wonderful dining experiences; of live music and plentiful plates, as we festively ate our delights away. The next day, the city maintained its active heartbeat; no shops were closed, children were seen running around local parks, our driver unaware that "war" had even begun.

7 – ALARMIST OR ALARMED?

We are all too aware of the realities of war happening in the region: Israel, the State of Palestine, now Iran. A week prior to our arrival, an airstrike conducted by the Israeli IDF hit the Iranian embassy in Syria, killing important military personnel… and civilians to make matters worse. I find it incredible how, plain 2024, political extremism and religious fanaticism still clash and crumple in waves of civil warfare, rebellions, and terror attacks like the ones we saw. Those videos of people being **put to the sword** (!) in scenes reminiscing the thirteenth, rather than the twenty-first, centuries. And, most worrisome of all; men, women and children getting sold as booty for war.

With this in mind, and troubled by the news shared from family back home, I was unable to sleep that night. 1:00am, 2:00am, 3:00am, 4:00am passed, as I turned off my devices to lay, meditatively, in bed. But the mind was already gone, I felt pessimistic and slightly disturbed.

At this very instance, breaking my inner peaceful quiet, an explosion is heard outside the hotel. My windows shudder lightly, and the room's-shadows are met by flickering lights.

I immediately break a cold sweat, not believing what had just been heard. "Seriously, my God!?", I palm my face in disbelief, "am I actually damned right now!?". "Those scenes we only see on TV!".

As if hiding from the muffled bangs coming from outside, I crouch behind my bedframe and cautiously approach the window, seeing clear reflections of explosions from the buildings facing ours. Some car alarms are off, people's shouts can be heard, not far. Trying to keep my head sane, I send a video to a WhatsApp group of close friends. Quite regrettably, their reactions only worsen the mood. "Get cover quick", "Leave that f*cking country", "Praying for you".

Suiting-on a bathroom robe, I decide to go for a hot, steamy shower, grabbing one of the paid-snacks at the mini-bar, and turning on my favourite *Lenny Kravitz* playlist. This was my response to a "flee-or-fight" situation. In retrospect, quite an odd reaction to have, but it didn't last long anyway. 5 minutes into showering, I grasp the severity of my surroundings, and rush-out the bathroom to call my guide, 4:26am. He readily answers, "Don't worry, it's fireworks", before I even say anything. "Are you sure? I can see the reflections from here, let me know if anything happens, I'll be packing my suitcase in the meantime…"

"Don't worry Nuno, sleep tight".

It was all a celebration. Apparently, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, IGRC, perpetrators of the missile attacks to Israel that evening, had a small headquarter near our hotel. They were "just" having a (very loud) party! From my room, all I could hear and see were loud bangs and reflections from the explosions. But another video, shared from a different hotel floor, gave us all a clearer view of what had actually happened.

8 –TEHRAN, A HAUNTED HOUSE

Earlier that day, before the drone strike to Israel (leading to our "emergency" repatriation back to Portugal), we drove around the foothills of the Alburz mountains, northern Tehran. As my "economist" sense kicked in, I reflected that everything should be valued for its scarcity; and here was no exception. Seeing a patch of greensward large enough to recline on, a shady tree or shrub, or the sound of rippling rivulets will always be MORE appreciated in Tehran than most places else.

It appears the local youth knew this too well, as they swarmed the beautiful gardens of the Niavaran Complex during our visit, early afternoon. Leading the gardens were gravelled walkways, shaded by rows of the most graceful *Chinar*s,

plotted alongside fig, pomegranate, almond, and apricot trees. While most parks in the city presented themselves "ideal" retreats from the hot weathers, this park had the additional charm of being historically relevant; In particular, for having been the property and, peradventure, favourite residence of the last King of Iran.

Yes, the Niavaran complex was built as the summer residence of Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah before Islamic rule. The "King of Kings", "Light of the Aryans", "Last Monarch to the Peacock Throne". - I saw this mesmerising "Peacock Throne" (not Mughal version) in the nearby *Golestan.*

"Iranians think of their sovereign as a father.... Now, if to you a father is inevitably a dictator, that is your problem, not mine."

On the ground, I simply cannot miss-out Pahlavi's influence towards Tehran and people's lives. The carriageway we drove from the airport to the city was his build. The "green belt" project, protecting Tehran from twin-scourges of desert winds and dusts, was also his initiative. Government ministries, hospitals, universities, schools, national parks; all pet-projects of the Shah. Even the bohemian works, museums, concert halls, and art galleries we passed by in admiration… built by his orders. Beyond Tehran, you have dams, oil refineries, factories and power plants commissioned by him too. A cool story I share with you: My Grandfather used to travel to Iran as advisor and executor to build these dam-projects, when Iran seeked "western intelligence".

Taking it all in, I bump into a kind-looking young man, in his early 30's, strolling a baby around the park, and we exchange ideas: "You know, Tehran today looks and feels like a haunted house (…) the Shah was trapped between two cauldrons; the Cold war and rise of Islam (…) not even your De Gaulle could have saved us!" he jokingly provokes. Firstly, let us clear the allegations; I am NOT French. Secondly, I realised he was risking himself by speaking so sensitively about this topic. Perhaps we telepathically knew this chronical would be written later. So, here I share, my friend, your curious testimonial.

Honestly, his description of a "haunted house" carried itself quite accurately as we entered the Pahlavi's old residence in the Niavaran. The exterior had a *Bauhaus* feel for design, which was interesting but not as elegant as I'd expect. The interior's design, however, was clearly more Gallophile; you sensed a lavish taste lost with time. Ultimately, all that was left was a sense of "something's missing", or simplicity. "Imperial Iran" and "simplicity" are, by rule of thumb, **completely** antonymous. We all know this.

The guide told us that most of the luscious porcelains, furniture, and carpets we expected to see had been ransacked during the revolution…

While visiting the different rooms in the residence, I sensed people secretly recording us from behind. We were accustomed to this already; tourism has been scarce in Iran for years now. Every turn I made, phones would be swiftly re-directed elsewhere. "Actually, I should be recording you!" I thought to myself. "Give me the confidence and freedom to photograph as I wish, and I would've dedicated myself to portraitures instead.". I could swear by Da Vinci's golden ratio; these people have the most perfected, strong, signatural expressions I've ever seen, which makes them **so identifiably Persian**, it's incredible. Iranian physiognomy is on another level.

Worst even, the "haunted house" feel carried itself as we visited the emblematic "Azadi Tower" later. This monument is considered by some as the " greatest metaphor of Iranian culture", so the signs of poor maintenance definitely caught us by surprise.

SHADOWS OF PERSIA

From the Niavaran we headed to the fabled Golestan, a space of many royal properties. Here is where the **only** reminiscent royal-garden of the Turkic-Qajar dynasty stands. The Qajari family ruled Iran for several centuries, before being ousted in 1925. Their successors, led by the Shah, were quick to hide this complex from public eye, building some abhorrently tall greyish-blue government buildings around it. They claimed the Golestan's radius was "occupying too much urban space" and should not interfere with the "growing demands of the city" … Nowadays, you are lucky to find the palace without using GPS … It is unfortunate, but honestly, this is the **ultimate** jewel of Tehran.

The terraced gardens facing each property were once hubs to "sounds of Nightingales and dancing fountains, smells of sun-dappled red roses and violets" - hence the nickname "Rose Gardens". Today, the greenery stands on much feebler feet, waterways mostly parched, and you spot a couple stray cats' roaming around. The perpetual elegance is what keeps it alive.

I walk to the Salem Hall to see the iconic *Naderi* Throne, encrusted on twenty-five thousand rubies, sapphires and emeralds, completely embellished by Persian figurative symbols: the lions, peacocks, and dragons.

"The ceremonies here were as grand as those in Imperial Russia, if not greater.", an aide tells us. "Here is where Reza Pahlavi crowned himself King, in style of Napoleon and Josephine". "His wife, Queen Farah…" I later read in the museum's plaques, "…wore a 26ft long, green veil, edged with white minks (…) completely star-studded with diamonds and pearls the size of Pidgeon's eggs".

Looking around, even the pillows (!) are threaded in gold. It is, without a doubt, the greatest showing of "icing-sugar" extravaganza to royal Persia. "Byzantine in its remotest magnificence".

A THREAD OF THE GOLESTAN

9 –TOOTH FOR A TOOTH

Walking past the Golestan, we arrive at the Grand Bazaar. It is messy, just the way I like it. Rushing through a maze of people and tight stalls, over a tolerably high vaulted ceiling, everyone gathers here to shop for daily goods and find a place to eat. My guide suggests I taste *Torshak* at one of the stalls. "Taste this apricot plump, you will love it", she smiles. In trust, I use a toothpick and pluck a few of them straight into my mouth. Immediately, my face scrunches up, eyes squinching to the sour taste of this treat, as she laughs hysterically, enjoying every single bit of my taste-bud's demise.

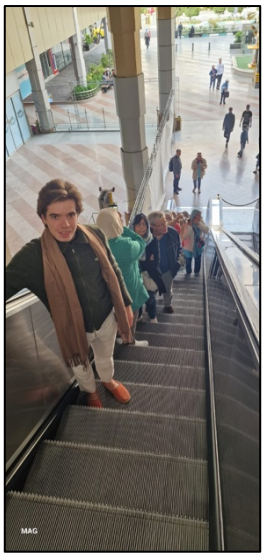
As we walk inside, people naturally start bumping and holding our arms to check their works, and a child even, with his hands covered in a clay-paste of sorts, determingly grabs my white-linen trousers asking for change. It is chaos installed, but we focus on reaching the other end of the Bazaar. This place still deserves the epithet - "beautiful".

Some of the antiquaries are interesting, especially those selling marbled pots and porcelains, but I fail to see much commerce for traditional Persian rugs. My guide tells me Tehran "isn't the place for that", rather to "wait until we've travelled down south". One man's workshop, nearby, claims to have quartzes of ruby and bronze selling from as far back as the *Sassanid* period, but my senses tell me they are modern imitations. I also spot ladies selling fragments of various weaves for dresses; some in beautiful silk brocades. There are animals within the complex too. One cage, in particular, is completely filled with baby chicks, oddly sprayed to the colours of the rainbow.

"Oh! Ronaldo!", I hear over my shoulders, as our guide leads us ahead with a Portuguese flag. We wink, smile, and high-five the younger children who are happiest seeing us here. Ronaldo is, leaps and bounds, Portugal's most recognisable figure, THE global laureate of entertainment, and we are lucky to have him. "A Portuguese is always welcome, wherever they go". We borrow Cristiano's goodwill to represent us abroad.

10 – TEHRAN MUST BE TALL, TO BE GLOBAL

After all the walks through parks, palaces, and bazaars, we charge our batteries to visit the **Milad Tower of telecommunications.** It hovers imposingly over Tehran. Visualize this building at 435 meters of pure concrete structure, erect and Swiss engineered; the tallest of its kind in Central Asia and the Middle East. The lower deck has a shopping centre, zone for arcades… even a Dolphinarium. Families and teenagers gather here to appreciate a true marvel of architecture and engineering. It is, literally, the heart of the "matrix" of Iran.



Having paid the entrance fees, taken a few selfies with locals, and heard a mini crash-course from the ticket-master, - (in)conveniently explained to us in Persian - we rush to the elevator. Once inside, a small child hides his face in complete despair, clinging to his mother dear. "The elevator rises extremely fast" we gasp… and it is completely encased in see-through glass… not for the faintest hearts. The higher we rise; I start to notice some shattered-glass panels. As if checking my guide in morse code, with a worried smile, she notices the broken glasses too and whispers to my year: "The elevator might be swiss-built by *Schindler*, but it's the Iranian Syndicate of Elevators who take care of it today… were you in time to say goodbye to your loved ones?". I try my hardest not to laugh.

The views from atop show everything you need to see. From birds-eye, there exists clear delineation between northern and southern districts, as briefly described in the earlier chapters. But the whole city remains beautifully crafted.

The gorgeous northern districts of Tehran, seen from the Milad.

As much as it pleasures me to write more about this view, I shall not go into greater descriptive detail, to the benefit of my reader, as we approach the end of this chronicle.

But I will mention a peculiar faux pas experienced here, heading to one of the lavatories of the tower. As I enter, a man is mopping the floors and points to an indication that cleaning is in practice. Out of respect, I show him the "thumbs up" 👍 and prepare to leave. The man drops his mop and starts insulting me in all sorts of ways, which I could not comprehend to reply, so I scurry myself out of the situation. Slightly worried about my behaviour's perception, I mention this to one of my tour guides, who laughs copiously. The thumbs up in Iran basically equals a middle finger by western standards. This means I had told the janitor to "stick one up his a**" when he advised me not to use the restroom. I went back to apologise.

To make matters worse, as I join the elevator to descend alongside an Iranian couple and child, I am aggressively pushed to one side by the husband before even standing properly. For some reason, the man felt insecure about my presence near his wife, despite my **clearly** innocent posture. In fact, he was standing in one end of the elevator, while she was in the other, so there was literally nowhere else I could've stood… besides respectfully in the middle! An incredibly embarrassing silence ensues, until the child whispers to his mother's ears asking for my nationality. She kindly asks me in return, with perfect English, and I reply "Portugal". After that, even the father joined with compliments and conversations about… you guessed it… Cristiano Ronaldo. The child performs the "*Suuiiii"* celebration for me, and I teach him a few kind words. He eagerly shows me his newly bought miniature keychain of the Milad, and we share a smile at the end. In true *Michael Scott*-ish fashion, how the "turns have tabled".

To end

I am not one to conclude a travel chronicle with a "lesson learned" or "ideology to be shared". Rather, I want to convey my real experiences in the most vivid ways possible, focusing on sparking curiosities in others. There are more stories that could've been written in this chronicle; but they'll remain untold. Tehran has given me surprising – and refreshing - revelations, and to that I am grateful. I've had the privilege of seeing a side to this country that few outsiders have, which gives me another reason to transcribe these memories into text. Personally, a journey to this part of the world is worth all the troubles that come with it.

In justice to everyone who contributed to this narrative, I admit being uneased about sharing their views of Iran. So, with full responsibility, whether right or wrong, I take their opinions as my own. Despite an honest desire to be accurate, and with the kindliest allowances from those I encountered, errors or misinterpretations may occur. I'm **not** a historian, nor a writer, just a hobbied storyteller. Thank you, Iran. **ممنون، ایران .من کشور و مردمِ شما را دوست دارم**.

PS: And thank you to all the news-reporters expecting our arrival. That was the cherry on top of the cake; the best way to end this bizarre **WEEKEND IN IRAN**.

Below: Click to view video